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Correlates of Life Satisfaction and Acculturation among University Students

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Abstract

The present study compared correlations between life satisfaction, acculturation, socioeconomic status, and social support for students born in the United States and for students not born in the United States. Acculturation scores differed significantly between American-born and foreign-born participants, while life satisfaction scores did not, indicating that living in a new country is not necessarily a negative experience for college-age students. Furthermore, acculturation to the host culture, that is, American culture, was found to correlate with life satisfaction among American-born students, and socioeconomic status correlated with acculturation for both groups. We recommend that future acculturation research control for socioeconomic status and include non-immigrant populations as comparison groups.

Keywords: acculturation, life satisfaction, socioeconomic status, social support

Research has shown that life satisfaction, which is used as a measure of global well-being, correlates significantly with health, making it an important subject of research (Barger, Donoho, & Wayment, 2009; Yang, 2008). Other significant predictors of subjective well-being have been found, including socioeconomic status and social support (Barger et al., 2009; Hyman & Dussault, 2000; Oppedal, Roysamb, & Sam, 2004; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2007). Because minority individuals are more likely to experience poverty, as well as added stresses of discrimination, considering multicultural issues is necessary when addressing issues affecting health. Included in these considerations is acculturation, the process of becoming acquainted with a new culture, which may cause lowered social support and, in turn, predict lowered well-being.

The present study examined the correlation between life satisfaction and acculturation among international and American-born students at a northeastern university. While some previous studies have shown that lower host society acculturation predicts lower mental health (Burnam, Hough, Karno, Escobar, & Telles, 1987; Graves, 1967; Roberts, 1980; Hyman & Dussault, 2000), others have shown one aspect of mental health, life satisfaction, to differ little among university students (Chow, 2005; Sam, 2001). These studies

measured correlates of acculturation only among immigrant populations, or at most second-generation immigrants, without using a comparison group of non-immigrants. The present study sought to add to the field of multicultural research by assessing both foreign-born and native-born participants. Following previous findings, we hypothesized that life satisfaction would differ little between American-born and foreign-born participants, and that socioeconomic status and social support would be correlated with life satisfaction.

Background Information

Life Satisfaction

In order to measure correlates of life satisfaction, Yang (2008) analyzed data from the General Social Surveys, which collected data on a multitude of subjects nearly every year from 1972 to 2004. Poor individuals were less likely to be happy, especially those in the lowest quartile of the income distribution, who were 26% less likely to be "very happy". Other factors that predicted the likelihood of happiness included race, marital status, education level, and health, which was most highly correlated with happiness. Those in "poor" health were seventy percent less likely to describe themselves as being "very happy". A similar correlation between poverty and

mental health was observed by Barger et al. (2009) as well.

Using data collected from over 350,000 participants from the National Health Interview Survey and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey, Barger et al. (2009) examined how differences in life satisfaction may be explained by correlations between socioeconomic status, race, social support, and health. It was found that overall, White participants had the highest life satisfaction, followed by Hispanics, then Blacks. Such differences were virtually eliminated when adjusted for socioeconomic status, health, and social relationships, which together accounted for about 24% of the variance, suggesting a meaningful relationship between socioeconomic status, health, and life satisfaction. This finding is consistent with Yang's (2008) general pattern of findings; life satisfaction appears to be accompanied by good social support, not having low socioeconomic status, and being in good health.

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status, or SES, can be defined as the "social standing of an individual or group in terms of their income, education and occupation" (American Psychological Association, 2012), all of which are closely linked. Lending support to this definition, one study by Ostrove and Adler (1998), which surveyed over 2,000 participants, found that education, income, and type of job were all significantly correlated with health. This is an important area of study, as low SES has been consistently shown to be linked with lowered health, including mental health (Adler et al., 1994; Saraceno & Barbui, 1997; Hudson, 2005; Williams, 1999; Ostrove & Alder, 1998).

Acculturation

Immigrants and the children of immigrants may face a difficult challenge in adapting to life in a new place, as moving away from friends may cause feelings of social isolation, and adopting a new culture may alienate members from social ties within the native culture (Hyman & Dussault, 2000). Currently, debate exists as to whether being acculturated to the host culture, native culture, or both, is most beneficial for the health of individuals. This debate has not yet been settled, as some researchers have found host society acculturation to be correlated with depression and drug use (Burnam et al., 1987), less happiness (Roberts, 1980), and more delinquent behavior (Graves, 1967); while others have found the opposite to be true (Melville, 1978; Salgado de Snyder, 1987; Schwartz et al., 2009). Among younger populations though, several studies have shown that individuals can adjust well to a different host culture.

In an effort to measure the effect of social support on the link between acculturation and mental health, Oppedal et al. (2004) surveyed 137 first-generation immigrants, all of whom were in the eighth grade. It was found that, consistent with other studies (e.g., Hyman & Dussault, 2000), lower cultural competence with an individual's native ethnic culture and host culture was associated with lowered social support and mental health. On the other hand, those who were low in native acculturation but high in host culture competence did not experience lowered social support, nor decreased mental health. These results were interpreted to mean that acculturation to the host society is not necessarily a positive or negative process, but that social support is an important predictor of mental health, regardless of

whether it comes from family or friends. This research is consistent with a separate study by Smokowski and Bacallao (2007), who also found that bicultural competence had a positive correlation with mental health among over 300 Latino residents (97% of which were not born in the United States). But, not all researchers have found host culture competence to be as positive.

Schwartz and his colleagues (Schwartz et al., 2011) surveyed over 3,000 first and second-generation immigrant college students, testing to see if dangerous behaviors (such as drug and alcohol use, impaired driving, and unsafe sexual behavior) correlated with cultural identification. Acculturation to United States values and ideals did not correlate with riskier behavior, but also did not correlate with demonstrating safer behaviors. These results differ from those of Oppedal et al. (2004) and Smokowski and Bacallao (2007), as acculturation to the host culture, in this instance American culture, did not exhibit any desirable correlations. However, because these studies did not use a comparison group comprised of members from the host society, conclusions as to whether host society acculturation (and the immigration that precedes it) is positive or negative may not be appropriate.

Relation to the Present Study

The present study sought to compare life satisfaction scores among American-born and foreign-born participants, and assess other possible correlates of life satisfaction, such as SES, acculturation, and social support. Unlike previous acculturation research, which studied only immigrants or second-generation immigrants, we included a comparison group of non-immigrant students. We believe that in order to draw appropriate conclusions about correlations

pertaining to host-society acculturation, a comparison group of American-born students is necessary, as acculturation may have important correlations among these students as well.

Even though several studies have demonstrated a link between mental health and acculturation, recent research has shown college-aged individuals to be reasonably happy (Chow, 2005), including foreign students (Sam, 2001). Therefore, it was hypothesized that life satisfaction among foreign-born individuals would be similar to that of native-born persons. It was assumed that those born in the U.S. would be more acculturated to American ideas and values, because there would be less influence from their heritage culture. Although we did not expect life satisfaction to differ between groups, we did predict acculturation to correlate with life satisfaction in both groups, because previous research has shown host society acculturation to correlate positively with social support, and in turn mental health (Oppedal et al., 2004; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2007).

It was also hypothesized that greater social support from family members would correlate positively with life satisfaction, given correlations found in previous studies between social support and mental health (Barger et al., 2009; Hyman & Dussault, 2000; Oppedal et al., 2004; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2007). Finally, given that SES has been shown to correlate with life satisfaction (Barger et al., 2009; Yang, 2008), SES was hypothesized to have a positive relationship with life satisfaction scores.

Methods

Participants

Twenty-four students at a university in the northeast were surveyed using a paper-

and-pencil survey, and 25 students took an identical survey online. One respondent was not included due to incomplete data, yielding 58 total participants. The sample included 10 foreign-born (9 females) and 48 native (39 females) students; 52 of the participants were Caucasian. Non-native students were from Italy (6), Mexico (2), Canada (1), and Germany (1). The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 38 years, with a mean of 20.4 years. All except two participants reported that they were single. One participant was divorced, and one did not respond to the question regarding marital status.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through the university e-mail system, and were asked to appear at a designated location to take the paper-and-pencil survey, or were sent a link to the online survey. Participation was encouraged by professors, who offered extra credit for their classes. For comparative analyses, participants were divided into groups: those who were born in the United States and those who were not. We eliminated one individual who did not answer any of the acculturation questions, and we excluded from the social support analysis one individual who failed to answer the question pertaining to social support. It should also be noted that one individual answered a satisfaction with life scale question as "3 [slightly disagree] or 5 [slightly agree], it depends", which was therefore scored as a "4 [neither agree or disagree]". Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 19. Correlations are reported as two-tailed Pearson *r* values, rounded to the nearest hundredth.

Measures

Life satisfaction. Life satisfaction, which is considered a measure of subjective well-being and mental health (Diener et al., 1985), was measured using Diener's (Diener et al., 1985) Satisfaction with Life Scale, or SWLS (Chronbach's $\alpha = .89$). The SWLS is a five-item measure that asks participants to rank their level of agreement on a seven-point scale with statements such as "In most ways my life is close to my ideal", and "I am satisfied with my life" (Diener et al., 1985, p. 72). This measure is widely-used in psychological research, including in previously-mentioned studies by Sam (2001) and Chow (2005), and was therefore chosen for this study. Often, scores are interpreted in terms of an individual's average (Sam, 2001; Chow, 2005), with average scores above neutral (over 4.0 on a 7.0 scale) indicating reasonably good life satisfaction (Diener, 2006). Therefore, average scores were considered for analysis.

Acculturation. Included in the survey was the Vancouver Index of Acculturation (VIA), developed by Ryder, Alden, and Paulhus (2000; $\alpha = .89$). This measurement conceptualizes acculturation in a bidimensional manner, meaning that a change in one cultural identity is not necessarily accompanied by change in another cultural identity. For example, an immigrant may become more acculturated to American society, without their heritage culture being affected (Ryder et al., 2000). Using this framework, the VIA includes two subscales, the "mainstream subscore" and the "heritage subscore", which assess an individual's cultural identification with the culture in which they live and their heritage culture, respectively. A total of twenty items are included in the VIA, which are answered on a nine-point scale.

Because only three foreign-born participants had family in the United States and most were therefore not surrounded by their native culture, but instead by American culture, we focused on the use of the mainstream subscore in order to assess adjustment to the host culture. The mainstream subscale contains ten items, with a possible score of nine on each, yielding a total score out of ninety. The mainstream subscore is then determined by taking the average of this score, ranging from 1.0 to 9.0 (Ryder et al., 2000).

Socioeconomic status. Due to the lack of a widely-used measure of socioeconomic status, the authors constructed a three-item measure of SES, using the same seven-point scale as the SWLS. Participants indicated the extent of their agreement with the following statements:

- I am currently worried that I cannot afford basic living expenses (such as food and housing).
- I am currently worried that I cannot pay my bills.
- In general, before I turned 17, my family was able to provide enough living necessities for me to live a comfortable life.

Answers to these questions yielded an “SES Score”, a total score out of 21 ($\alpha=.61$). Two items were reverse-scored, such that higher “SES Scores” were indicative of higher socioeconomic status. Subjective social status has been shown to correlate with health (Ostrove et al., 2000), and was therefore also included as a measure of SES. Other items, such as parental education, parental occupation, and parental home ownership were measured, but are not discussed due to a lack of their predictive usefulness in this sample.

Social support. Aside from the assumption that greater host culture

competence would likely mean more social support, (as supported by Oppedal et al., 2004), social support was also measured by agreement with the statement “I do not get to speak to my family members and loved ones as often as I would like to”. This item was on a seven-point scale, and was conceptualized to represent support from members of an individual’s heritage culture, such that agreement with the item (a higher score) indicated lower social support.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

The ranges, means and standard deviations for all measures are provided in Table 1.

These descriptive statistics are presented for all participants together, for U.S.-born participants only, and for foreign-born participants only. The measures include subjective SES, “SES score”, average Satisfaction with Life Satisfaction Scale scores, mainstream acculturation subscale scores, and social support.

Subjective SES and “SES Score”

Subjective socioeconomic status was measured by asking participants to indicate whether they considered themselves of lower class, lower-middle class, middle class, upper-middle class, or upper class. Coding these on a scale of 1 to 5, with five indicating “upper class”, subjective SES was correlated with “SES Scores” to determine the validity of this measure. Among both U.S.-born ($r(46) = .57, p = .01$) and foreign-born participants ($r(8) = .74, p = .02$), the two measures were moderately but significantly correlated. Comparing SES between Groups

Across all participants, the “SES Scores” ranged from 7 to 21, averaging 16.67 out of a possible 21. The mean subjective SES was 3.22, falling between “middle class” and “upper middle class”. Independent t-tests (two-tailed) showed significant group differences in “SES Scores” ($t(56) = -2.28$, $p = .03$) and in subjective SES ($t(56) = -2.14$, $p = .04$). Those born outside of the U.S. were higher on both measures of socioeconomic status.

Acculturation between groups

Foreign-born students had a mean VIA mainstream subscore of 6.13 ($SD = 1.42$), while U.S.-born students averaged 7.41 ($SD = 1.00$). Independent, two-tailed t-tests supported the hypothesis that scores would differ significantly between the two groups, ($t(56) = 3.41$, $p = .01$).

One might assume that since participants born in America have lived in America for most, if not all, of their lives, acculturation to U.S. norms would be high among all U.S.-born individuals. However, native-born students’ scores ranged from 4.9 to 9.0. This may be due to the fact that some students may differ in the number of friends they have, how much free time they have to participate in social activities, the extent to which their moral values differ from American culture, the number of previous generations living in the United States, or a myriad of other possible factors.

Life Satisfaction and its Relation to Acculturation

For those born in the United States, mainstream subscores on the VIA were significantly correlated with life satisfaction, supporting the hypothesis of a positive correlation between acculturation and life satisfaction ($r(46) = .30$, $p = .04$). Among

those not born in the U.S., though, a nonsignificant negative correlation was found ($r(8) = -.42$, $p = .22$). It is possible that foreign participants felt isolated from their native culture and pressured to conform, and were therefore not happy being more acculturated to U.S. culture, or perhaps life satisfaction was independent of acculturation for this group.

More research on this topic is needed. Typically, studies focus only on acculturation among immigrants or foreign populations, without measuring acculturation among those born in the U.S. As this study shows, though, there may be important differences, and similarities, in the relationship between participation in host culture and life satisfaction between the two groups.

Acculturation and its Relation to SES

An unexpected, but interesting, finding was that both SES measures were positively correlated with mainstream acculturation subscores. This relationship between subjective SES and “SES Scores” to mainstream acculturation was significant among native-born students ($r(46) = .46$, and $r(46) = .49$, respectively, $p = .01$), but not among foreign-born students ($r(8) = .23$, $p = .53$, and $r(8) = .35$, $p = .32$, respectively). Although determining a causal link from this correlation is not possible, it is plausible that those higher in socioeconomic status may be able to better afford to participate in cultural activities that require money, like going out with friends to movies and concerts. Given that three of the ten questions on the Vancouver Index of Acculturation mainstream subscale directly assess participation in social activities, which likely would require economic resources, it is not difficult to imagine why SES and acculturation would be related.

Life Satisfaction and its Relation to SES

There was considerable overlap in scores between the two groups on the Satisfaction With Life Scale. Group differences in life satisfaction were not significant ($t(56) = .27$, $p = .79$). Although life satisfaction scores did not differ, the two groups did differ in how socioeconomic status correlated with life satisfaction.

Among U.S.-born participants, both subjective SES and “SES Scores” were significantly related to SWLS scores ($r(46) = .46$ and $r(46) = .53$, respectively, $p = .01$). This finding supports the hypothesis that as SES increases so too does life satisfaction, as found in previous studies (Barger et al., 2009; Yang, 2008). However, among foreign-born subjects, the relationship between SES and life satisfaction was not significant ($r(8) = .07$, $p = .85$ and $r(8) = -.13$, $p = .72$, for subjective SES and “SES” Scores, respectively). SES and subjective well-being have been shown to correlate across many cultures (Oishi et al., 1999). The lack of statistical significance in the present study may be due to the small sample size.

Social Support and Life Satisfaction

The results did not support our hypothesis regarding social support and life satisfaction. Participants born in America who agreed that they do not have the opportunity to speak to their families and loved ones as often as they would like (indicating less social support) had marginally lowered life satisfaction ($r(46) = -.24$, $p = .10$). The correlation for foreign-born students was not significant ($r(7) = .38$, $p = .32$).

Social Support and Acculturation

A significant negative correlation was found between social support and acculturation in foreign-born students ($r(8) = -.81$, $p = .01$). Although this relationship was not considered prior to analysis, it seems reasonable in retrospect. Those who are less acculturated to the host society might miss their families more, and therefore report that they did not get to speak to them “as often as they would like to.” This would produce a negative relationship between the two variables. Therefore, the “social support” question used in this study may be more aptly named the “I miss my family and loved ones” question.

Conclusions

Summary

Some of our hypotheses were supported; life satisfaction did not differ between groups, and acculturation differed significantly between groups. Other hypotheses were partially supported, as SES was significantly correlated with life satisfaction but only for U.S.-born participants, as was the case with the correlation between acculturation and life satisfaction. Social support was not significantly correlated with life satisfaction. Other unexpected but interesting findings included significant correlations among U.S. participants between SES and acculturation, and a negative correlation among foreign-born participants between acculturation and the desire to speak to family members more often.

Although causal conclusions cannot be drawn from correlational information, these results do raise compelling questions: Why were group differences found in the relationship of SES and life satisfaction, and

between acculturation and life satisfaction? Why would members of a host culture differ so greatly in acculturation scores? What is the role of family contact when studying abroad?

Future research may find some answers to these questions by using different methods and considering a broader range of participants to study. One method that may be useful is conducting qualitative interviews that directly ask participants about their study abroad experience, whether they felt happier in their home country or while abroad, when they most wanted to talk to their family and why, whether they felt pressured to become acculturated to U.S. norms and values, and which specific aspects of acculturation were most difficult for them. Structured interviews such as these may reveal important elements not previously considered, which could then be used to develop new measures.

Our results demonstrate that the link between host society acculturation and life satisfaction is not one that exists only for those with a strong, native culture background. Although researchers have focused on measuring acculturation among foreign populations, it is also useful to study those from an American cultural background. As this study demonstrates via the large spread in mainstream acculturation scores among American-born participants, individuals who grow up in American culture differ in the extent to which they feel acculturated to that culture, and that may have implications for life satisfaction.

Implications of the Present Study

University students were, on average (mean SWLS score of 5.33), highly satisfied with their lives (Diener, 2006). Given the multitude of studies linking subjective well-

being with mental health, this is an encouraging finding. At least for U.S.-born students, it was also found that SES correlated with acculturation, both of which also correlated with life satisfaction. Increasing participation in the host culture may be useful, if in fact there is a causal relationship between acculturation and life satisfaction. Such a task might be accomplished by encouraging participation in student clubs and organizations, trips, movie nights, guest speakers, sports events, and other social activities on and around campus. Multicultural and international student affairs offices are also extremely helpful in this matter, as organizers and volunteers plan events and help study abroad students become better acquainted with their universities.

The significant relationship found between socioeconomic status and life satisfaction among those born in the United States should also be considered. About one quarter of the students sampled here were at least somewhat worried they could not afford basic living expenses. Universities may be able to address students' economic concerns by keeping basic living expenses, such as health care services and meal plans, affordable.

Final Thoughts

The present study demonstrated that, among U.S.-born students, life satisfaction correlated significantly and positively with both SES and acculturation, as did socioeconomic status and acculturation. Among foreign-born students, a significant negative relationship was found for mainstream acculturation and the desire to speak with family and loved ones. Future studies should explore further the relationship between SES and acculturation, and consider correlates of acculturation

among members of the host society. It is our hope that future research will be able to discern a causal mechanism behind the correlations investigated in this study. That information could then be used to develop policies and procedures that would help individuals adjust to American culture and achieve high levels of life satisfaction.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for all Measures
All Participants

	N	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Subjective SES	58	2.00	5.00	3.22	.80
SES Score	58	7.00	21.00	16.67	3.53
Average SWLS	58	1.80	7.00	5.33	1.16
Mainstream Accult.	58	3.70	9.00	7.19	1.17
Social Support	57	1.00	7.00	2.58	1.71

U.S.-Born Participants

	N	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Subjective SES	48	2.00	5.00	3.13	.76
SES Score	48	7.00	21.00	16.21	3.65
Average SWLS	48	1.80	7.00	5.35	1.20
Mainstream Accult.	48	4.90	9.00	7.41	1.00
Social Support	48	1.00	7.00	2.44	1.66

Foreign-Born Participants

	N	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Subjective SES	10	3.00	5.00	3.70	.82
SES Score	10	17.00	21.00	18.90	1.60
Average SWLS	10	3.00	6.40	5.24	1.04
Mainstream Accult.	10	3.70	8.30	6.13	1.42
Social Support	9	1.00	6.00	3.33	1.87

